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Gavin Miller

Animals, Empathy, and Care in Naomi Mitchison's *Memoirs of a Spacewoman*

Naomi Mitchison's *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* (1962) imagines a future in which animals are drawn into the horizon of the human sciences. Its dramatic substance is attempts by its narrator, Mary, to communicate with both Earthly fauna and with the various animal-like alien species that she encounters. Whether confronted by dogs, pigs, dolphins, and horses or by extra-terrestrial starfish, centipedes, sea urchins, caterpillars, and butterflies, Mary must draw on her formidable capacity for empathic understanding in order to foster ethical relationships with other Earthly and alien species.

My reading of Mitchison's novel divides into three sections. The first discusses what may be seen as the principal *novum* in *Memoirs*. Although Mary's future Terrans can travel in time and space, the innovation that dominates the narrative is their ability to communicate with animal life (a *novum* that Mitchison appears to develop via an implicit dialogue with R.D. Laing's phenomenological psychiatry). A highly-developed capacity for attentive sympathy plays a vital (but not in itself total) role in the ethical relations that Mary maintains both with Terran and extraterrestrial animal life. The second part articulates the consequences for Mary, and her culture, of this imaginative confrontation with otherness. Mary becomes increasingly conscious that her own modes of rationality are embodied: her preference for binary oppositional thinking, for instance, is a prejudice created (so she concludes) by the bilateral symmetry of the human body. The final section considers Mitchison's representation of an alternative feminine ethical rationality that flows from mammalian embodiment and attachment and that prioritizes relations of attentive care. This ethic, which closely parallels contemporary debates in feminism and animal rights, should—Mitchison's text implies—complement the sophisticated sympathetic phenomenology apparent in Mary's culture. Mary's potential ethic of care is, however, repressed by her society, which still takes as normative certain masculine ethical standards. My conclusion shows how Mitchison's re-embodiment of ethical reason, although admirable in many ways, does not escape gender essentialism. As much as we may appreciate the prescient sympathetic and caring ethic that is represented in *Memoirs*, the text—unlike more recent theoretical paradigms—portrays this faculty as exclusive to women, and beyond the grasp of men.

A future phenomenology. Perhaps Mitchison's most obvious challenge to the binary opposition between humans and animals is the highly-developed ethical relationship between the two that is depicted in *Memoirs*. Mary's bond with animals is something more than merely the imperfect duty outlined in the Kantian argument that "humans have a 'natural predisposition' which is useful for morality and which must be conserved, and that inhumane (as we say) treatment

of animals tends to destroy this disposition and must therefore be avoided" (Guyer 325). Certainly, in Mary's world, dolphins and their ilk are treated as "intellectual equals, or, on certain subjects, superiors" (Mitchison, *Memoirs* 72). But these highly intelligent animals, presumably candidates for Kantian moral agency, are just part of Earth's "amiable fauna, within reach of normal affection" (18)—even experimental animals such as dogs and jackals have their task explained to them in their own terms, so that "it was something they did for their dearest humans out of their affection and loyalty" (51). In *Memoirs*, compassionate and affectionate treatment of animals is an end in itself, rather than simply a means by which to cultivate moral relations with other humans.

The fictional world in *Memoirs* most likely represents Mitchison's personal views, for she saw herself from childhood onwards as both kin to animals and in communication with them. Animals were to Mitchison potential members of her society, with whom she could communicate, and who could act as interpreters with the wider animal world. Her parrot, Polly, "was a person" through whom she "was able to communicate with the macaws at the Zoo, even the great red and yellow ones (Polly was blue-green), and get them to respond" (*Small Talk* 96). Such a narrative of woman-animal relationships resonates with modern female and feminist accounts. Mitchison's empathic relation to animals has clear parallels with, for instance, Jane Goodall's rejection of behaviorist approaches to ethology. The latter's work with the chimpanzees of the Gombe involved a (rationally verifiable) imaginative identification with animals, rather than a merely external observation of stimulus and response: "A great deal of my understanding of these intelligent beings was built up just *because* I felt such empathy with them. Once you know *why* something happens, you can test your interpretation as rigorously as you like" (Goodall and Berman 77-78; emphases in original).

There are also significant parallels between Mitchison's views on empathy and recent feminist research on sympathy in the ethical treatment of animals. Josephine Donovan, for instance, points out that both natural rights theory and utilitarianism have in common "their rationalist rejection of emotion or sympathy as a legitimate base for ethical theory about animal treatment" ("Attention to Suffering" 174). But a feminist animal ethics might well reject masculinist assumptions about sympathy. In fact, says Donovan, sympathy is not "whimsical and erratic, nor does it entail obliteration of the thinking or feeling self"; it is also, she insists, "easily universalized" ("Attention to Suffering" 185).

At the time in which Mitchison was writing *Memoirs*, however, Goodall had only just begun her work in Africa, and contemporary developments in feminism and animal rights were still in the future. Mitchison's location of moral behavior in sympathy and empathy, and her presentation of the empathic understanding of animals, therefore, has quite different intellectual roots. These are hinted at by the appearance of 1960s "anti-psychiatry" in *Memoirs*, when Mary goes on an expedition to a planet colonized by the Epsilons (or "Epsies")—a race, in effect, of highly intelligent centipedes, whose "colonist mentality" is a "moral crudity" beyond which humans have progressed (36). The tirelessly-industrious Epsies, who merely "asked and answered questions, decorated themselves, elaborated

their dwellings and their technical organisation and were undisturbed by their infrequent matings,” may well satirize the bourgeois culture of European colonists in Africa and India (34). At any rate, their representation connects an absence of empathy with animals to the oppression of both colonized peoples and psychiatric patients. The Epsies live on their planet with a native species, whom the explorers christen the “Rounds.” Though not strictly hominid, the Rounds are described as something between playful primate, pre-industrial native, and psychiatric patient. The Rounds “made shelters, decorated themselves with fringed, blue leaves, and a kind of shining nut-like growth, and plucked their sparse silky fur into patterns” (37). The anti-psychiatric parallels appear when the Rounds are herded by the Epsies into an enclosure, a scene which reminds Mary of a mental hospital, something familiar to her only from history courses. A supervising Epsie employs a peculiar instrument to administer a “little nick” to the heads of the Rounds, turning them into “docile and unanxious entities” (43): “They were wandering about, not jumping or yelling or singing or expressing any violent emotion, and apparently in no pain.... the peculiar shine or glow of activity had died out of them” (42). The Epsies, then, vampirically suck the bloodlike fluid from the Rounds, and use their desiccated corpses “as building materials” (43).

This representation of a specifically psychiatric exploitation of the Other alongside that of colonized peoples and animals gives an important clue to some of the intellectual context that informs *Memoirs*. Mitchison possessed, or was possessed by, what she called an “under life” of overwhelming fears and fantasies that were inexpressible to “anyone who would treat the whole affair on a rational basis. Indeed this is only too clearly what happens often enough to mental patients. They must be met halfway with understanding, as I am sure happens when there is a combination of good psychiatry with enough time” (*All Change Here* 95-96). The representation of psychiatry as normalization in *Memoirs*, and Mitchison’s vocabulary of being met with “understanding,” probably indicates some knowledge of R.D. Laing’s psychiatric work, which was coming to prominence in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Works such as *The Divided Self* (1960) argued that psychiatry should use the interpretative methods of the human sciences to render intelligible the seemingly nonsensical words and actions of the “mad.” Whether in the understanding of “ancient texts” or “psychotics,” we must “bring to bear what is often called sympathy, or, more intensively, *empathy*” (Laing 32; emphasis in original). “Like the expositor, the therapist must have the plasticity to transpose himself into another strange and even alien view of the world” (Laing 34).

Laing’s references to the *Geisteswissenschaften* [human sciences] may help to explain why Mitchison so faithfully echoes Wilhelm Dilthey’s account of interpretation in her depiction of an explorer who must also empathically transpose herself into many “strange and even alien view[s] of the world.” Dilthey claimed that “empathy” was the “state of mind involved in the task of understanding” (226) and argued that through contact with different cultures, “inner-directed man can experience many other existences in his imagination. Limited by circumstances he can yet glimpse alien beauty in the world and areas of life beyond his reach” (228). Mitchison’s late short story, “Conversation with

an Improbable Future" (1990), set in the same fictional world as *Memoirs*, outlines the importance of understanding and empathy to Mary's culture: "[C]ommunication" is "the essential aim and prize for any space explorer" ("Conversation" 227), and "the beginning of communication," claims Mitchison's narrator (the daughter of a spacewoman), is "[u]nderstanding, sympathy" (231). Although Mary in *Memoirs* seems to have telepathic abilities, and also has technological assistance, the foundation of her work is the method prescribed by Dilthey for the human sciences. Mary frequently refers to the "sympathy or empathy with other forms of life" that she is called upon to exercise (*Memoirs* 88), and she describes her training in the imaginative reconstruction of the other's point of view: "One reads and watches, one steeps oneself in 3D and 4D; one practises detachment in the face of apparently disgusting and horrible events; one practises taking bizarre points of view" (17).

Indeed, such training is more or less what is proposed by contemporary feminist thinkers on animal rights, such as Donovan, who hope to cultivate our powers of sympathy:

We also need education ... in the practices of care and empathy. Years ago, in fact, Gregory Bateson and Mary Catherine Bateson contended that "empathy is a discipline" and therefore teachable.... Many religions, they note, use imaginative exercises in empathetic understanding as a spiritual discipline.... Such exercises could be adapted for use in secular institutions like schools (including, especially, high school). ("Caring to Dialogue" 365)

The human-scientific, rather than natural-scientific *novum* in *Memoirs* is thus the exploration by Mary's society of its kinship with animal and extra-terrestrial life, an interrogation that extends the reach of empathy beyond the human transpositions that interested Dilthey. Exploration in Mary's world is only incidentally spatial (or temporal—there are also time travelers). Mitchison's explorers are not interested in the conquest of territory or time, but in the psychological voyage necessary to intersubjective understanding. Exploration seems to have lost its acquisitive, colonialist impulse.

Reason and embodiment. *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* numbers amongst that apparently small group of sf novels that refuse, in Fredric Jameson's words, to "skip over the linguistic dilemmas ... either by omitting the intricacies of linguistic categories as such, or by having the aliens learn English instead" (102). Mary's communication with animals is, however, not just about the substitution of empathic *Verstehen* [intuitive understanding] for the instrumental logic of the *Naturwissenschaften* [natural sciences]. Mary also recognizes the Other in herself; her interspecies communication provokes confrontation with her own animality.

In order to communicate with the non-humanoid aliens that she encounters, Mary—as a good interpreter—has to both foreground and discard the distinctively human pre-understandings or prejudices that she brings with her. This process is quite apparent in her encounter with an alien species of intelligent echinoderms, "something like a five-armed starfish" (20). As Mary gradually learns to communicate with them, she begins to adopt their thought patterns. With their radial symmetry and five arms, this species "never thought in terms of either-or.

It began to seem to me very peculiar that I should do so myself, and that so many of my judgements were paired; good and evil, black or white, to be or not to be" (26-27). Certainly, the starfish can distinguish between ideas, courses of actions, and so forth; they do not, however, arrange the world into polar concepts: "two or more choices could be made more or less conflicting though never opposite" (27). Even Mary's language changes in this "five-choiced world" which cannot be adequately recalled in "sharp and unambiguous, plain uncompromising Terran words, often with exact opposites" (28).

It may be tempting to analyze Mary's experience as a confrontation between the rigid and hierarchical binary oppositions of phallogocentric or phonocentric rationalism and (for example) some alternative feminine language. Yet one should note that Mitchison's text offers a quite different account of the prejudice that is foregrounded by Mary's meeting with the starfish: "It is only in circumstances like this that we realise how much we ourselves are constructed bi-laterally on either-or principles. Fish rather than echinoderms" (20). Human animality—in this case, the inherited morphology of "a two-sided brain, two eyes, two ears, and so on" (26)—furnishes a basic, yet by no means fixed or unavoidable, conceptual scheme. Mary's explanation is therefore somewhat at odds with the approaches dominant in literary criticism, which tend to rely upon structuralist and post-structuralist theories that oppose cultural, and often linguistically-determined, variability to a monolithic biological determinism.

But Mary's narrative should not immediately be dissolved into a post-structuralist parable, for it is certainly possible to reconcile cultural variation in cognitive patterns with their embodiment. The familiar structuralist example of the variability of color terms between cultures has, for example, been investigated in recent cognitive science. As George Lakoff notes, "[i]f one simply asks speakers around the world to pick out the portions of the spectrum that their basic color terms refer to, there seem to be no significant regularities"; yet there do appear to be "basic color terms," with a neurophysiological basis, so that, for instance, "in languages that have a basic term for colors in the blue range, the best example is the same focal blue for all speakers no matter what language they speak" (26). Through such analyses, Lakoff develops his theory of experiential realism, which claims that "conceptual structure is meaningful because it is *embodied*, that is, it arises from, and is tied to, our preconceptual bodily experience" (267; emphasis in original). Even "abstract conceptual structure" (268) can be traced back to features of our experience such as "[k]inesthetic image-schematic structure," including "orientations and relations" such as "UP-DOWN" and "FRONT-BACK" (267).

Such arguments for the embodiment of reason might seem to invite a biological determinism whereby the body stamps its patterns upon thought, and cultural variation is simply ignored. Yet it is important to note that Lakoff's theory presents embodiment as a repertoire of possible conceptual structures. Take for instance the trope, familiar to readers of sf, of progress or advancement into the future. The embodied schema of this thought pattern is clear: the future is that which is in front of us, while the past is mapped onto what is behind our backs. Yet this bodily mapping of time, though widespread, is, as Rafael Núñez

and Eve Sweetser reveal, by no means universal. Speakers of Aymara, a language found in the Andes, use a quite different conceptual structure that involves “a static mapping of past and future onto the space in front of and behind Ego, respectively” (442). Aymara therefore reveals “how fundamental abstract everyday concepts such as time, although ultimately grounded in the same universal human bodily experience of the world, can get shaped in specific ways to generate cultural variability” (442). Indeed, one might also speculate on the value of the Aymara conceptual scheme for our own culture: what if we were to go “back to the future,” no longer boldly advancing into it, but rather cautiously edging our way backwards? The metaphor is certainly more appropriate to scientific reasoning, which must infer inductively from the past that is visible before us, to the unknown future that is behind us. At any rate, to conclude that “[o]ur forms of reason . . . are not independent of our animal nature” (Lakoff 368), is not to accept that they are entirely determined by our embodiment, or immune to cultural or individual variation.

A maternal ethic. Contemporary feminist theory also challenges the assumption that Mitchison’s emphasis on the animality of her female narrator must necessarily represent a politically regressive, determinist position. Admittedly, attributions of animality to women are historically associated with the elevation of men to the status of free, rational, spiritual subjects, and the relegation of women to the position of unfree, irrational, animal objects. Yet as researchers in animal studies such as Lynda Birke argue, reproaches to biological analysis often proceed from the assumption that “animals are little more than their biology; this is what constitutes their animality” (11); “Implicit in these critiques is the notion that *animal* behaviour is largely innate, to some extent determined by their intrinsic biology, while ours seems somehow to be completely emancipated from biology” (12; emphasis in original). If animal nature is seen as “inherently fixed” (13), then the idea of kinship with animals seems to present a demeaning dead end for feminism. On the other hand, if animals are not Cartesian “beast-machines” (117), then we need not, as Birke puts it, “assume the mantle of god-like disembodied minds” (12), or indulge in what Mary Midgley calls the “fantasy” of a “yawning metaphysical gulf between people who are pure subjects and animals that are mere objects” (176). Mitchison’s novel represents human-animal relations in order to put the human, and the specifically female, subject back into a biological body; yet it does so to show the body as the ally, not the enemy, of supposedly “mental” or “spiritual” phenomena such as thought, language, culture, and ethics. Such re-embodiment is particularly apparent in Mitchison’s representation of an ethic of care with its roots in maternal nurture.

In order to understand properly Mitchison’s representation of this ethic, it is necessary to remove an intellectual obstacle that stands in the way. There exists a temptation to see Mitchison’s spacewoman in the terms demanded by psychoanalytic theories that reduce love to some manifestation or sublimation of sexuality. Sarah Shaw, for instance, argues that Mitchison presents an erotic that “always places women’s pleasure at the fore of her projections of the future,” whether this be in “a depiction of a mother tenderly nursing an infant, or the

physical detail of an extra-terrestrial's organs or pseudopodia penetrating a woman to give reassurance or satisfaction" (164). Shaw tends to see nurturing in Mitchison's work as a disguised expression of sexuality: "It is only with the metaphorical child that details of organ and orifice, sensation and movement can be detailed. Though thinly disguised as maternal nurturing, the explicit language speaks to Mitchison's concern with female sexuality" (163).

Shaw applies her hermeneutic of suspicion to a scene in Mitchison's *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931), where Erif Der, the protagonist, nurses her infant son, "thrusting her breast deep into the hollow of his mouth, that seized on her with a rhythmic throb of acceptance" (*Spring Queen* 304), while her "other breast let its milk drip in large bluish-white drops..., then softened and sagged and waited" (304). Certainly, by figuring the breast as phallic, and by emphasizing the physical release of breastfeeding, Mitchison analogizes adult sexual relations with suckling. But this equivalence works both ways: it does indeed assert that breastfeeding provides pleasure; but it also implies that copulation between adults echoes the tender love found in the coupling of mother and child. It is quite possible to reverse Shaw's rather formulaic reading, and argue instead that Mitchison is trying to represent the reality of the tender, nurturing feelings that may accompany sexual love. Mitchison's poem "Comfort" (1990), for instance, explicitly compares suckling with sexual relations, not because the mother-child relation is "erotic" in the Freudian sense, but because sexual relations are the scene of tender feelings between adults—particularly, it seems to Mitchison, in the satisfaction of male dependency needs. When "[a] woman comforts a man," "he does not know"

That the woman's mind is faithless;
It is not with him.
Nor with any man, for to her all men are children.
She has been sucked by baby men, giving them freely her body
As now she gives it. (135)

This reversal of the usual hermeneutic of suspicion, which sees sexuality "behind" love and tenderness, may seem unusual, but it is more than some eccentricity on Mitchison's part. In British and particularly Scottish culture from Modernism onwards, there has been a counter-discourse that resists the Freudian reduction of love to a manifestation of sexuality. As Mark Spilka points out, D.H. Lawrence chose "*Tenderness*" as "his first title for *Lady Chatterley's Lover*," a word that implies "personal feelings, affections, soft sentiments from the conscious heart" rather than "dark impersonal passions from unconscious depths" (363). The Scottish psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Ian Suttie (1889-1935), to whom Spilka refers, was also part of this resistance, arguing that love begins "with the nurturing process in infancy, when the body first responds to love" (376). Suttie claimed in *The Origins of Love and Hate* (1935) that one of the few contexts in which adults could mutually express such tender feelings was in sexual congress, where "we excuse tenderness or sentimentality ... on the grounds of its sexual intention and tendencies" (84; emphasis in original).

The suspension of a reductive attitude to love is particularly necessary for readers of *Memoirs* because Mitchison draws upon John Bowlby's attachment theory in her representation of a feminine ethic based on empathy and nurture. Mitchison's use of attachment theory is clearest in "Conversation with an Improbable Future," where the narrator describes how "most women who decide to have children give one or two years of their life to the first bonding, which means the assurance of love for the life-time when the child, having this base, can and does reach out for others" (223-24). The security of this emotional base, claims the narrator, "leads to the expectation of loving relationships between all humans" (224), and, indeed, with all "the many lovely animals of Gaia" (225). The metaphor of a base, constructed during the early mother-child relationship and supporting later love relationships, was first developed by Mary Ainsworth; it became a key concept as Bowlby's theory developed: "In her study of Ganda infants Ainsworth ... notes how, soon after an infant is able to crawl ... he makes little excursions away from her [i.e. the mother], exploring other objects and people and, if allowed to do so, he may even go out of her sight. From time to time, however, he returns to her, as though to assure himself she is still there" (*Attachment* 208). The mother, or other carer, provides a "secure base" (*Secure Base* 11) to which the child can return if exploration proves distressing. Without such provision, later relationships will, Bowlby argues, be marked by patterns of insecure attachment based on the child's internalized expectation that others will be indifferent or hostile to its dependency needs.

The animal inheritance described by attachment theory has led Mary Midgley to ask whether such innate social dispositions "supply, in some sense, the raw material of the moral life" (136). Mitchison's text poses the same question: could it be that the logic of our moral life (as much as, for instance, the logic of polar opposition) has a specifically evolved, embodied basis in our biological life as animals with long periods of nurtured infancy? The question is raised in *Memoirs* on a planet that is inhabited by two closely-related intelligent life-forms, the "caterpillars" and the "butterflies." The all-female crew on this expedition have "a great feeling of sympathy and warmth" towards the caterpillars (91), whom they touch, pet, and fondle. These happy relationships are, however, interrupted by the butterflies, who direct psychic blasts of condemnation towards both these creatures and their carers. As the explorers interact with the two species, it becomes clear that the caterpillars are indeed the larval form of the butterflies, and that the butterflies' assault is what activates the caterpillars' chrysalid stage. The butterflies believe that a caterpillar that has foregone its rudimentary aesthetic activities, and that has avoided fertilization, will hatch into a butterfly that is potentially immortal, and that can spend eternity in rhapsodies of contemplation. Fertilized caterpillars, on the other hand, hatch into butterflies that will in turn lay caterpillar eggs and die in the process. The central conflict in the caterpillar and butterfly sequence is whether the explorers' feelings of sympathy with the caterpillars can legitimate a moral judgment against the actions of the butterflies, or whether the apparent perfection of the resultant butterflies must override such feelings: "Were the butterflies," asks Mary, "morally entitled to behave with such

cruelty to their own larval forms in order that occasional bliss among themselves should result?" (117).

An affirmative answer to this kind of question is provided by certain branches of the Western ethical tradition, of which Aquinas is a particularly apt representative in the present context. Aquinas is well known as a proponent of the position that animals are without souls and that animal nature is entirely caught in the chains of efficient causation: "as soon as an animal, whether by sense or by its imagination, is offered something to which its appetite is naturally inclined, it is moved to that alone, without making any choice" (280). The butterflies' ethic, which prohibits such immediate satisfaction in the caterpillars, allegorizes a supposed liberation of the soul from animal embodiment. The Thomistic conclusion that "man's ultimate happiness consists solely in the contemplation of God" (Aquinas 60), rather than in enjoying the goods of the body, seems to be played out, aesthetically if not quite theologically, when the explorers encounter a butterfly that has apparently escaped death, "circling round a tree which had a particularly beautiful and curiously shaped blossom" (Mitchison, *Memoirs* 116). The creature experiences an "intense aesthetic perception" that Mary perceives as "an enhanced sense of well-being or hope" (116), and that others in the crew experience as "contemplation and communion with ecstasy" (117).

Mitchison's text opposes this ethical model in which the soul can supposedly free itself from embodiment. As *Memoirs* makes clear, the butterflies can pursue their ethic only because their *own* non-human animal nature excludes maternal impulses. The Thomistic aspiration to transcend certain forms of human animal motivation would, in other words, be suitable only for a different kind of species altogether. An intelligent animal species that progressed from instar to instar, but in which the imago stage felt itself to have no properly social relation to the larval stage, would be a fit embodiment for such an ethic. It is an evolutionary accident of their bodies, rather than some quasi-Kantian *causa noumenon*, that allows the butterflies to be so indifferent to the caterpillars:

The butterfly had no maternal feelings, could not have. It was no part of this evolutionary pattern. The eggs would look after themselves, even if a few perished, and when they hatched it would be into something utterly alien from their mother, and, again, capable of survival on their own. Maternal feelings could have had no outlet. The butterfly's egg-laying then was pure loss. (111)

Indeed, it is not even that butterflies lack an "outlet" for their feelings; they simply do not have them at all. They do not rear their young, and so they lack empathy with their offspring: the butterflies regard their actions as humans would "the melting of ore to make steel or the grinding of wheat grains to make bread. We could not convey to them any sense of compassion, as humans know it, at any rate not to larval forms" (121). It is this sense of human compassion that motivates one of the crew, Françoise, who treats her "damaged and miserable caterpillars" as if they were "[h]er children" (113), to break the explorers' code of non-interference by killing the only butterfly that appears to have reached the state of final immortal perfection, an act that leads to her confinement on Earth as punishment.

Mitchison's text therefore rewrites the metaphysical opposition between "mind" and "body" as a dualism based on a fantasy of embodiment in a metamorphic species. This fantasy, as the narrative of *Memoirs* makes clear, continues even within Mary's future society. Admittedly, the crew of her spaceship think of the butterflies' ethos as part of Earth's historical past. Mary, for instance, sees a religious parallel with periods when "people were tortured and burnt alive in order to save their souls in another life, which most of them, perhaps, did not believe in" (118). Another crew-woman sees the caterpillar-butterfly interaction as resembling the "postponement of enjoyment" that "happened ... in the capitalist countries during their period of major industrial development" (118). Such comparisons draw attention away from the manner in which the explorers themselves are pursuing an ethic in which a supposed freedom from their animal nature is the highest good. The explorers regard themselves as liberated from time (because of time dilation), and thereby superior to the "non-exploring Terrans," who "are mostly interested in power and pleasure which the rest of us cannot help considering to be of a rather worthless kind" (127). Mary pities Françoise, who, because she is imprisoned on Terra and thus imprisoned in time, "can never be the ageless, beautiful person—but was she really beautiful or is it just my memory?—that my own mother was" (126). The parallel with the butterflies and caterpillars is unmistakable: to be a Terran is "[t]o be, as it were, wingless in the Galaxy. Prisoners of time" (125). But where the butterflies had at least the possibility of immortality, the eternal life that Mary pursues is a confidence trick. Although the explorers can outlive their parents and peers, this "immortality" is only from the Terran perspective. Most explorers last only a few missions and die in middle age. Earthbound Terrans live longer lives, but do not live so far into the future.

Mitchison's implicit criticism of the explorers' impossible aspiration to imitate the butterflies is closely allied with feminist projects that criticize the supposed gender-neutrality and disembodiment of ethical reasoning. Sara Ruddick argues, for instance, that the human interest in child rearing has a corresponding knowledge reached through "maternal thinking" (346). For Carol Gilligan, there is a specifically feminine way of ethical thinking: she contends that "men initially conceive obligation to others negatively in terms of non-interference," while women experience "an injunction to care, a responsibility to discern and alleviate 'the real and recognizable trouble' of this world" (100). This feminist care ethic has proved to be a resource also for animal studies. Donovan praises Ruddick, Gilligan, and others, for proposing "an ethic that requires a fundamental respect for nonhuman life-forms," and which, though "it recognizes the varieties and differences among the species," "does not quantify or rank them hierarchically" ("Animal Rights" 74). "Out of women's relational culture of caring and attentive love," Donovan concludes, there "emerges the basis for a feminist ethic for the treatment of animals. We should not kill, eat, torture and exploit animals because they do not want to be so treated, and we know that" (76).

The explorers' morality of non-interference is an obvious point of contrast with such maternal or feminine logics. To take non-interference as one's "prime

directive" assumes that one's interests are primarily separate from those of others. But if one's well-being is inextricably bound to the well-being of another, as in relations of care, then moral dilemmas are more likely to be about how far one can pursue separate interests without abandoning those interests that are fulfilled through responsibility to others. Yet such dilemmas will appear "real" or "reasonable" only in so far as such emotions are not consigned to the realm of the "merely animal." Such relegation of an embodied care ethic to the domain of nature, to the realm of the heteronomous, is central to another narrative strand in *Memoirs*—that of Mary's repeated dealings with a species of alien parasites, the "grafts," which exert a particularly powerful and uncomfortable effect upon female hosts. When Mary first hosts a graft, she finds herself caught up in a pseudo-pregnancy: ovulation ceases, her breasts swell and ache, and she has "feelings of malaise, of the kind which one understands used to be common during pregnancy" (54). Her graft (which she has named Ariel) eventually falls off, provoking some quite literal attachment behavior in Mary—"Instead of being relieved by the separation, I felt I couldn't bear it. I even cried a little" (55)—which is complemented by Ariel's own proximity-seeking behavior: "When I got back poor Ariel was obviously agitated and anxious. I knelt, and immediately it wriggled and rolled up to me again" (55). When Mary repeats the experiment, after her encounter with the caterpillars and the butterflies, there are further indications that powerful feelings of care, or tenderness, are in some way unfamiliar, improper, or pathological within Mary's culture. She feels "two-minded about taking another; a mixture of attraction and repulsion which was too strong to be part of any normal make-up" (85). The feeling of "hidden, but complete satisfaction" that she experiences while hosting a graft can only be a regression to "a pre-intellectual state" (149), to being "[s]omebody, from a scientific point of view, delinquent" (159).

The grafts, as well as provoking psychological discomfort in Mitchison's characters, represent somatically the fusion of interests in relations of care—a merger that Mary, as a representative of her space-traveling culture, experiences as delinquency, irrationality, and regression. Such unscientific delinquency is apparent in the "irrational amount of care and affection" (101) that Françoise lavishes on her caterpillars, and it is also apparent in Mary's relationship with her daughter, Viola. Mary is disturbed by a "stab of tenderness" (140) towards her daughter, which she extends to Viola's Martian "father," Vly, who triggered Mary's parthenogenetic pregnancy. Later, after Mary has returned from another expedition, she holidays with Viola (who is now in her teens, thanks to time dilation), and experiences further temporary insanity as she contemplates her daughter's beauty: "I let my self think crazily and with deep love up there on the snowfield" (141). Mary understands that her enduring relationship with Viola is unusual for her culture:

It is odd, nowadays, for a parent to have so much responsibility towards a child.... One does not yearn tenderly, owningly, over one's children, not at least after the first few months. One treats them as human beings, individuals, with the inalienable right not to be owned, to have their own space and their own time.

Even the earth-bound, the non-explorers, realise this, dissociating children and guilt. (140).

But such separation and “non-interference” is not as easy as Mary thinks. Reflecting on her relationship with Viola, she suffers an unconscious guilt, experiencing a “curious sense of blame” (140) and dreaming of her surrogate children, the Rounds and the caterpillars. Indeed, the guilt of surrendered care relations is quite explicit, even before this point in the narrative, in her initial encounters with these animal aliens. After the butterflies’ psychic attack, the caterpillars emit “a pitiable crying for help, so that I thought suddenly and guiltily—a quite irrational and disquieting feeling—of my own little children, most of all Viola, and my little curly-gold Jon, Peder’s son” (91). The Rounds, too, are a source of guilt to Mary; at the time “[a]ll that I felt was deep shame.... Somehow I had failed, perhaps betrayed, those whom I thought of as my friends” (45). During a brief hallucinatory episode triggered by the alien atmosphere, Mary even fantasizes about sacrificing herself for these friends: “it appeared to me that the only way to achieve my end was to mount the cross myself and to bleed, explaining in a loud voice that I had not been nicked, that I was fully aware, and that this blood was freely and for ever available instead of the blood of the Rounds” (44); but to do so would be to accept the metaphorical cross of animality, of embodiment: “I was irrevocably fastened to a piece of heavy wood,” imagines Mary, “and so could never any more be an explorer” (44).

Mary’s capacity for empathy is therefore imprisoned in hermeneusis. Sympathy is acceptable to the explorers insofar as it leads to gains in understanding. But the same empathy that Mary employs, and that the text strongly implies is founded in secure attachment relations, could also promote a distinctively feminine care ethic. Yet this moral logic cannot be recognized so long as it is regarded as an ego-external intrusion of the body’s animal nature upon a pure rational (and perhaps implicitly masculine) will. The problem is analogous to that faced by a purely phenomenological theory of animal ethics: “Understanding that an animal is in pain or distress—even empathizing or sympathizing with him—doesn’t ensure, however, that the human will act ethically toward the animal. Thus, the ordinary emotional empathetic response must be supplemented with an ethical and political perspective” (Donovan, “Caring to Dialogue” 364). Mary merely observes the exploitation of the Rounds by the Epsies, even though it echoes psychiatric abuse, colonialism, and the exploitation of animals. Similarly, she does not interfere on this planet, despite her suspicions of the butterflies’ ethic and its resemblance to economic and religious ideology. Without an ethics and politics of care to go with her capacity for empathy, Mary’s skill in understanding is purely epistemic; it becomes, in the end, an illustration of the maxim *Tout comprendre, c’est tout pardonner*.

Conclusion: Mitchison’s problematic essentialism. Despite the striking parallels between Mitchison’s novel and contemporary ideas of a feminine ethics, one should not exaggerate the affinity of *Memoirs* with modern feminist thought. Although Mitchison skillfully uses her fictional human-animal interactions to promote the ethical treatment of animals, and also to reveal the embodiment of

Mary's thinking, the text tends to essentialize the capacity for nurture and empathy as *female*, and not merely feminine. Certainly, as Birke notes, the "feeling of empathy, of connectedness is gendered; it is stereotypically associated with femininity in our culture" (46). Yet Mitchison's narrator goes further and claims that "communication science is ... essentially womanly. It fits one's basic sex patterns" (26); and the action of the story seems to bear this out—the crew on the planet of the butterflies and caterpillars are emphatically all female, and Viola, who is a haploid, seems to have an extra capacity for empathy precisely because she has double her mother's genes. It may also be that the butterflies, who have no maternal feelings, are intended to be representative of a *male*, and not just stereotypically *masculine* ethic.

Although Mitchison's story subverts the mythology of reason as disembodied, and seeks to re-embody various kinds of rationality, it colludes with the myth that reason is determined by the *sex* of the body. *Memoirs* is certainly not a text ruled by a Cartesian ideology, in which, to use the words of Genevieve Lloyd, "[t]he distinction between Reason and its opposites" will "coincide with Descartes' very sharp distinction ... between mind and body" (46). But Mitchison's re-incarnation of reason suffers from what may be identified as "the pervasive ... belief that the anatomical body locates the unarguably real body, the literal body, the body whose immovable and immobilizing substance must be secured outside the discussion" (Kirby 70). The anatomical body is, of course, a product of natural causality: it is not conjured up *ex nihilo* from the words, biological and anatomical, that we use to talk about it. Yet these words, in their contemporary usage, betray what Myra J. Hird calls "the cultural need to support sexual dimorphism" (42). This need, which Hird sees as apparent in post-Renaissance science, emerged in an urge to categorize (and indeed medically "re-assign") human individuals into two exclusive kinds, "male" and "female," which seem to exist as polar opposites. The social corollary of sexual dimorphism is "*sex complementarity*," the view which "held that women and men were, biologically, better suited to different roles, and that these roles complemented each other to form the optimum living, working system" (23; emphasis in original). Since the bodies to which our rational souls are restored may be categorized by a seemingly natural sexual dimorphism, Mitchison's narrator and perhaps Mitchison herself (who might well have accepted this biological dogma) seem to affirm that reason must also share in this relation of mutual exclusion and opposition.

What therefore emerges in *Memoirs* is something like a Rousseauist view of the complementary status of "male" and "female" reason, as described by Lloyd: "Rousseau repudiated the dichotomies between pure thought and bodily passion or sensuousness ... in favour of a view of Reason as continuous with and guided by Nature" (78), yet in so doing, he proposed that "women have their own distinctive kind of intellectual character or mode of thought" (75): "What she lacks in the way of a grasp of universals, woman makes up in her possession of other mental traits—taste, sensibility, practical sense, feeling" (76). Mitchison's Rousseauist position promotes a kind of cognitive mutilation not just for women, who are confined within their sphere of tender rationality, but also for men, who are encouraged to accept that they can never have the kind of caring ethical

consciousness valorized by Mitchison's text. *Memoirs* challenges the false opposition between human and animal, between the spirit and the beast-machine: it shows how capacities for logical, communicative, and ethical reason are embodied in an animal inheritance, and it represents an ethic of caring attachment that extends (ideally) to humans and animals, Terrans and non-Terrans. But the human species is then divided by *Memoirs* into two kinds of "ethical primate" (to borrow Mary Midgley's phrase): namely, the male and the female. Mitchison fills in the supposed metaphysical and ethical abyss between human and animal, only to excavate an (empirically unsubstantiated) naturalized gulf between male and female.

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ABSTRACT

Naomi Mitchison's *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* (1962) represents the adventures of Mary, a female explorer who uses her highly developed capacity for empathy to communicate with animals. Mary's attentive sympathy plays a vital role in the ethical relations which she maintains with both Terran and extra-terrestrial animal life. Her animal encounters also foreground the embodiment of her own rationality, and particularly the potential for an ethic of care derived from mammalian biology. This ethic is to some extent repressed by Mary's society, particularly within the space-exploring sub-culture to which she belongs. Although Mitchison's novel is forward-looking in its representation of a caring, sympathetic ethic that extends (potentially) to all life, it is complicit with myths of gender essentialism: empathy and care are limited specifically to the female in *Memoirs*.